



An Army CH-47 Chinook helicopter lands at Roberts International Airport in Liberia, Africa, during Operation United Assistance. (Photo by Spc. Andrea E. Lagrow)

The Movement Control Battalion's Role in Airfield Operations

The 53rd Transportation Battalion (Movement Control) assumed responsibility for airfield operations during its deployment to Operation United Assistance.

■ By Lt. Col. Kevin M. Baird and Capt. Alejandro Loera

The 53rd Transportation Battalion (Movement Control) (MCB) arrived in Liberia in support of the Operation United Assistance mission to fight Ebola on Oct. 24, 2014, just before the transfer of authority from U.S. Army Africa to the 101st Airborne Division. In addition to its doctrinal mission of theaterwide move-

ment control, the battalion assumed the mission previously executed by Joint Task Force—Port Opening (JTF-PO).

The ground mission of an Army rapid port opening element aligns closely with the missions of a movement control team (MCT) and a platoon from an inland cargo transfer company. However, JTF-PO had an

Air Force command and operational element that provided airfield management, air traffic control, and robust communications, including access to the Secret Internet Protocol Router Network and voice over Internet Protocol. The MCT did not have these capabilities.

During the deployment, the 53rd MCB consisted of the headquarters

and headquarters detachment, the 632nd MCT, and the 609th MCT. The battalion was also supported by a command post node team and a platoon of military police for force protection.

The 53rd MCB was augmented by the Air Force 787th Air Expeditionary Squadron. The squadron consisted primarily of aerial porters and brought with it two K-loaders, two 10,000-pound all-terrain forklifts, and a wealth of experience in cargo management on the flight line. This team loaded and unloaded both civilian and military aircraft and served as an Air Force liaison for cargo and personnel operations.

Senior Airfield Authority

Since the Air Force had no aircraft stationed in Liberia, no senior Air Force officer was there to assume the role of the senior airfield authority (SAA). Army Field Manual 3-04.300, Airfield and Flight Operations Procedures, says that the joint force commander should designate an SAA for each airfield in order to ensure unity of effort for airfield operations being conducted at a foreign airfield.

The SAA is “responsible for the control, operation, and maintenance of an airfield to include runways, associated taxiways, parking ramps, land and facilities whose proximity affect airfield operations.” Although this is normally an Air Force mission, the joint force commander may designate an Army airfield operations battalion to serve as the SAA.

With no inherent capability in the battalion and no airfield operations battalion in the task organization, the 53rd MCB commander became the SAA and used key S-3 staff members and aerial porters to manage day-to-day operations and projects.

With additional tasks coming from the SAA mission and the significant requirement to manage air cargo and aircraft, the MCB reorganized the S-3 shop to manage

the air mission. The newly formed air movement section was responsible for all airfield tasks and synchronization with the aviation task force and civil authorities.

RIA Operations

Liberia’s Roberts International Airport (RIA) was primarily used for commercial passenger service prior to the Ebola outbreak. Be-

movement for cargo.

During JTF-PO’s time at RIA, it assisted the local authorities with developing a prior-permission-required management system for aircraft. Because the maximum number of aircraft on the ground was limited to three, at times aircraft were unable to land and offload their cargo. Initiating the prior-permission-required process

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cause of travel restrictions imposed by other nations and fewer business travelers, the number of passenger flights decreased significantly. At the same time, the international response to the outbreak increased the number of commercial cargo aircraft and military flights dramatically.

During the deployment, a number of units rotated through RIA. As part of the initial deployment to Liberia, the Marine Corps deployed four MV-22 Osprey aircraft as part of the early-entry package. With the arrival of the main body, the Ospreys were replaced by Army CH-47 Chinook helicopters and UH-60 Black Hawk helicopters.

RIA also served as the single point of entry for all fixed-wing aircraft, including C-17 Globemaster IIIs, C-130J Super Hercules, and a wide variety of commercial aircraft. Managing the space and operational requirements for all of these assets was challenging at times, requiring coordination with the civilian airport authority in order to merge military and civilian operations. Daily challenges included synchronizing aircraft arrivals and departures, scheduling materials handling, and arranging onward

allowed the flow into the airport to be metered, increasing efficiency and improving operations.

Communications Requirements

Little additional equipment beyond what was on the modified table of organization and equipment was required to accomplish the mission. The most critical piece of equipment was a multiband radio with a modified antenna that allowed the staff to talk to aircraft to confirm cargo and ground support requirements approximately 30 minutes before landing. This step became an important part of the mission to minimize the ground time of U.S. military aircraft by notifying the Air Force aerial porters of the estimated time of arrival.

With the multiband radio, the air movement section could request fuel for U.S. military aircraft. The section also used the radio to ask the air traffic control tower for permission to enter the apron to retrieve repair parts for the supply support activity and Ebola treatment unit equipment delivered via commercial flights. More importantly, the radio facilitated the continuous runway inspections conducted by the Army Corps of Engineers.

Cargo Operations at RIA

The 787th Air Expeditionary Squadron executed flight line operations and managed the offload of cargo and transport of equipment to the staging area. From that point, a platoon from the 372nd Inland Cargo Transfer Company assumed responsibility for the cargo, which it either loaded directly onto contracted civilian trucks or moved to its staging yard for later transport. Throughout the process, the MCT oversaw each step.

For the first part of the deployment, the MCT was a combination

of the MCB staff and Soldiers from 632nd MCT. Approximately halfway through, the battalion received a second MCT, the 609th MCT, which assumed duties for control of all cargo operations at RIA.

Airfield Improvements

Because of the increased number of wide-body military and commercial aircraft and the conditions of RIA's runway prior to the arrival of the U.S. military, the Joint Forces Command decided to repair several areas of the runway. As the direct liaison with the airport civil

authority, the 53rd MCB ensured that all necessary preparations for runway closure were in place before repairs commenced.

The contracting officer's representative for the runway repairs conducted two inspections per week in coordination with the 53rd MCB. To help preserve the runway, the Joint Forces Command tasked the 62nd Engineer Battalion and the 615th Engineer Company with placing markers on the runway that served as a warning to aircraft of the distance remaining during takeoff and landing. Before the runway was improved, landing aircraft would immediately apply full brakes.

Through flexibility and adaptation, the 53rd MCB managed operations at RIA, directly contributing to the fight against Ebola while executing more traditional missions related to ground transportation. With the likely increase in small-scale contingencies and the always present requirement for movement control, MCBs and MCTs must remain prepared to assume nontraditional roles.

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Spc. Adrian Cueto and Spc. David Harms, 53rd Transportation Battalion, inspect equipment received at Roberts International Airport during Operation United Assistance. (Photo by Spc. Andrea E. Lagrow)